

How to Find the Best Supported Employment Program for You

Illinois IPS Podcast Series*

JC: Welcome to our podcast on supported employment. My name is Judith Cook and I'm here with Lisa Razzano of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy. Today we'll be talking about how to find the best supported employment program to meet your needs. Lisa, what exactly is supported employment and how does it work?

LR: Supported employment is a service that helps people find and keep jobs in order to build successful careers. Research shows that supported employment is effective in helping people with mental illnesses find and keep jobs. We know that supported employment works better than other services, like sheltered workshops or transitional employment. Supported employment programs go by different names. A common one is Individual Placement and Support, also referred to as IPS. However, all supported employment programs have the same goal, which is helping people to get and keep high-quality jobs of their own choosing.

JC: That's very helpful. So how would a person go about locating a good program?

LR: Start your job search by asking your mental health service provider to refer you to a good supported employment program. If this route doesn't work, there are two state agencies you can contact. One is your state's department of vocational rehabilitation. To find it, look in the phone book or Google your state's name plus the words "vocational rehabilitation." The second agency to contact is your state or county department of mental health. Tell them you're looking for programs that offer supported employment services for people in mental health recovery. You can also use free on-line supported employment program locators. There's one at the web site www.ipsfinder.com/. If you live in the state of Illinois, you can get a map of supported employment programs by going to the web site www.illinoisips.org. Once you're there, scroll down to the section called, "Looking for IPS Supported Employment Services" and click on the links.

JC: Let's say I've found a couple of programs to consider. What should I do next?

LR: Once you've located some supported employment programs, you'll want to find out what kinds of people they serve and what they have to offer. One way is to look them up on the Internet. Most programs have a web site describing the services they offer. We also suggest that you schedule a visit to the program so you can talk to the staff about what they offer. You'll do this to find out whether they can give you services that research shows really work. We offer a free guide with questions to ask during your visit. Once you have the answers, you can add up the program's score to see how good it is. The guide is called Seeking Supported Employment and you can download it at www.center4healthandsdc.org/self-directed-recovery.html.

JC: What a great free resource! Can you tell me more about how to use Seeking Supported Employment?

LR: Sure. Let's start by talking about the kinds of questions you'll ask when you visit a program. First, you'll want to find out whether the program helps people get competitive jobs. By competitive, we mean jobs that anyone can apply for, not just people with disabilities. They're also jobs that pay at least minimum wage. This is important, because if a program doesn't help you to find a competitive job, then it's not a supported employment program. You're not interested in programs that help you get jobs that pay below minimum wage, or jobs that are only open to people with disabilities. You want a program where someone will help you find an open position, and then support you in applying for it and going

through the interviewing and hiring process. Getting this kind of support will have a big impact on the success of your job search.

LR: Next, you'll want to ask if the program has experience working with people who have mental illness. This is important because you'll want your employment staff to be familiar with your specific disability. You'll want them to be prepared to talk with your case manager, if you have one and you want that extra support. Or, you might want employment staff to speak to your psychiatrist, if you're taking medications and need an adjustment before or after starting work.

JC: That makes a lot of sense. What other questions should you ask?

LR: It's also important for staff to help you identify the kinds of jobs you prefer, and what work settings you'd like to work in. Your job preferences and interests affect how you feel about your job, and the time that you spend there. The enjoyment we get from work helps us get through times of stress, like trying to meet a big deadline or taking on new responsibilities. You should look for supported employment programs that ask you what kind of work you like, what work settings you prefer, the hours you want to work, how far you want to commute, and other factors that are unique to you as a worker. These preferences are important in helping you find a job that is right for you. They also help to increase your job satisfaction which is important for holding onto a job.

JC: That's so true. What other questions should you ask?

LR: A good supported employment program also works with you after you're hired. Program staff should help you develop skills and habits for keeping your job. It's important to ask staff about the kind of help they'll give you once you start working. Research shows that people need suggestions about how to deal with problems at work. They also need help when they change roles due to a promotion. Be sure to ask whether the staff will support you for as long as you hold your job and want help. Programs that focus on helping you *keep* your job are more likely to help you stay employed. Also, these programs tend to emphasize finding a higher quality job, and this can lead to even better jobs over time.

LR: Ongoing job support is also beneficial because work can affect your life in several important ways. For example, sometimes employment can change the benefits and entitlements you receive, such as SSI or SSDI. Supported employment staff can tell you whether, and exactly how, a job will affect your benefits. Staff can also help you make decisions about whether to work more hours or take a position that pays more money. You'll want to make sure that working doesn't have a negative impact on your personal financial situation. Good supported employment staff can help you make informed choices by giving you information about how a job will affect your bottom line.

JC: I can see where that kind of assistance would be critical. What other important questions should you ask?

LR: Supported employment staff can be valuable allies when you need to talk with your supervisor about problems or obstacles at work. However, staff should only talk with your boss if they have your permission. It's up to you whether you want your employer to know about your physical or mental health, but sometimes it can be helpful. Employment staff can help you decide how and when to talk with your employer about your disability. They can also help you think ahead about what you might ask for to be more successful on the job. This might be a change in your work schedule or time off to see your psychiatrist. As I mentioned earlier, with your permission, staff can also be valuable partners in helping you to coordinate with your other service providers, like your case manager or psychiatrist. These other services can help you maintain wellness in your work life, in addition to your physical health and recovery.

JC: This has been very enlightening. Do you have any final words of wisdom to share with our audience about finding a good supported employment program?

LR: The decision to work is a personal and important step for everyone, especially people with disabilities. Supported employment programs offer services, ideas, and information that can help you to be successful in whatever job you choose. Remember, the first step is to find a program that offers the right kinds of services, using suggestions from this podcast. The next step is to give supported employment a try, and to keep on trying until you find a job that's right for you. I wish you the best in finding the help you need to build your career.

JC: Thanks for listening to this podcast, which is part of the Illinois IPS Podcast Series, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.